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ABSTRACT

Intended to help teachers understand the complexities of the writing process, this pamphlet offers a model for writing conceptualized in three phases: stimulus, process, and product. The process phase is then examined from the perspectives of: consciousness, speed and elaboration, and mental/physical interaction. The following implications for writing instruction are discussed: (1) teachers should not make assumptions about the process characteristics of their students; (2) students need to understand their own, personal process characteristics; (3) teachers can suggest, demonstrate, and model process options for students; and (4) teachers can expand opportunities for students to examine others' processes by structuring collaborative writing and editing activities. Collaborative writing and editing are also discussed in separate sections. Finally, the pamphlet describes the benefits of selective correction of student writing and ways to use writing for spelling improvement. A list of references and suggested resources is appended. (SRT)

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A Model for Teaching Writing: Process and Product

Donovan R. Walling

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A Model for Teaching Writing: Process and Product

by
Donovan R. Walling

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Table of Contents

Introduction 7

A Model for Writing 9

Examining the Process Phase 12

Implications for Writing Instruction 16

Collaborative Writing 19

Collaborative Editing 22

Selective Correction 25

Spelling Improvement Through Writing 28

Some Final Thoughts 30

Suggested Resources 31

References 32

Introduction

Many people have misconceptions about what it takes to produce a piece of writing. Not least among them are teachers. The difference is that most people do not attempt to teach students to write. Teachers do. And so it is important to dispel misconceptions that may get in the way of producing good writing, especially since the process of writing is highly individual and can only be generalized within broad bounds.

Two misconceptions that are most detrimental to teaching writing effectively are 1) writing is a deliberate, linear process, and 2) therefore, it is essential for teachers to teach students to write in a deliberate, linear fashion. The first notion is true of only *some* writing produced by *some* writers. It is certainly not true of all writing or of all writers, maybe not even most writing or most writers. Consequently, no foundation exists for the second notion.

This complex task called writing may be approached in deliberate, linear fashion; but there is nothing that says it must be. Indeed, many writers produce a piece of writing without apparent deliberation and without going through the traditional linear steps of prewriting, writing/drafting, editing/revision, and so on. Syndicated columnist William F. Buckley Jr., for instance, has been criticized on occasion for writing "fast," by which his critics mean that he apparently skips many of the traditional steps between conception of an idea and written

product. His pointed reply is that "there is no necessary correlation between profundity of thought and length of time spent on thought" (Buckley 1986).

Buckley is right, of course. And so why shouldn't there be students who avoid deliberate, linear approaches and yet produce successful writing? And why should teachers feel compelled to train these students to use teacher-prescribed patterns that, for these students at least, are unnatural and ill-suited?

Perhaps a better model for thinking about writing is one that is more cyclic than linear, one in which the mental processes used to create a written product are reciprocal and interactive. Writers (and teachers) who have thought much about writing often come to the conclusion that the process is more like a wrestling match than a foot race. The elements of the process are more likely to get all mixed up than to run in neat, parallel courses toward a product finish line. The process of writing simply is not neat in most cases; it does no good to pretend that it is and to teach based on that pretence. Let's admit that writing is inherently messy business and learn to live with it, to wrestle with it, and to teach students to deal with the messiness.

A Model for Writing

In thinking about how writing happens, it is helpful to conceptualize it as three phases: stimulus, process, and product. Figure 1 illustrates these three phases far more neatly than the act of writing usually proceeds for most writers, whether they be students or professionals. What actually occurs as a writer moves through each phase reflects the idiosyncracies of the writer, working both consciously and subconsciously.

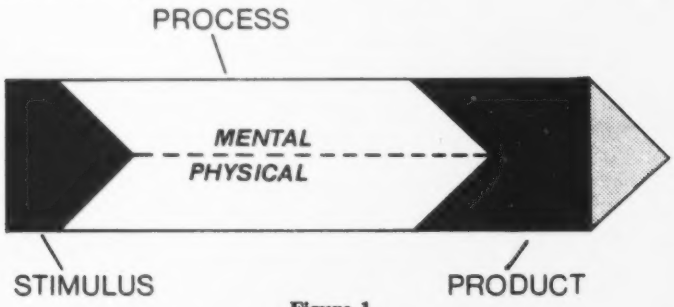

Figure 1

Let us consider stimulus first. Writers do not write out of thin air; their ideas do not arise from spontaneous generation. Rather, they write in response to thought, to conversation, to observation, or to

some other initial "spark" that lights the creative fire. The stimulus for writing is not necessarily anything very esoteric. Many writers write because they are assigned a subject (for example, reporters, columnists, business writers, etc.), but having a topic assigned does not necessarily result in writing inferior to that of writers who select their own topics. Assigned writing tasks often result in highly creative products.

Many authorities on writing advocate that students be allowed to choose their own writing topics, because student interest is a great motivation for writing. In the real world, however, writing topics are often assigned by others. Therefore, it seems prudent for teachers to strike a balance between the number of topics students can choose for themselves and the number that are selected for them.

The process phase of writing can be divided into mental and physical components. The three-phase model of Figure 1 visualizes these components as a kind of highway divided into two lanes. The driver on this highway, the writer, proceeds from stimulus toward product (a piece of writing) by way of either lane, crossing from one to the other at will and even straddling the line, as in "stream of consciousness" writing where thoughts are recorded as they occur.

The mental component includes such activities as brainstorming, analyzing, rehearsing, organizing, and evaluating. The physical component is not limited to the mechanical task of writing or typing; it might include acting out, talking to oneself or others, moving about, drawing, or other activities, which may or may not be closely related to the accompanying mental processes. Out of this dual-track of the process phase eventually emerges a product.

Product as used here means a piece of writing of some kind but not necessarily a finished composition. A product may be merely a set of notes or random jottings. It may be an outline or a list of ideas. It may be a diagram or a word map. Whatever form it takes, it is the tangible, recorded response to the process phase. This response then recycles and becomes part of the stimulus – along with continued thinking, external comment or criticism, more observation or reading – for additional processing. Thus, the cyclic nature of the model is established. Only after a series of cycles do most writers reach the final product of a written composition.

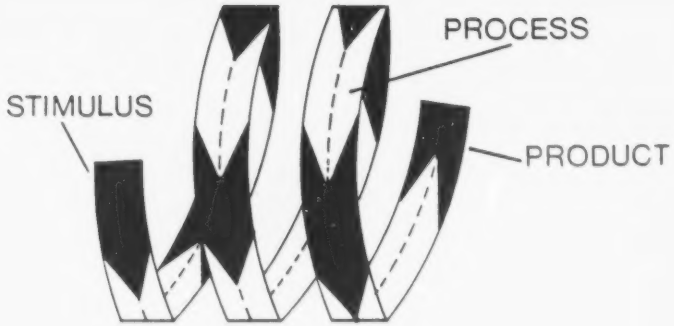

Figure 2

Figure 2 completes the model by showing the spiraling, cyclic, or recursive nature of the three phases. The road to good writing, to carry out the analogy, may be one of few loops and curves or many, depending on the writer, the writing task, and other factors that either facilitate or impede the writing act.

While writing is seldom as neat as the illustrative model, the conceptualization does visually fit the nature of writing as long as one realizes that Figure 2 is only one of an infinite variety of loops and curves that might occur in any given writing project. More or fewer loops, longer stretches on the process "highway," and more or fewer product/stimulus stop-overs are all possibilities depending on the idiosyncrasies of the writer and the writing project itself. But even with all these variations, it is clear that the process phase of the model is at the heart of writing. Therefore, it is the process phase that we shall examine more closely.

Examining the Process Phase

The real heart of writing is that ground between stimulus and product, the process phase. Therefore, let us examine this phase from three perspectives: 1) consciousness, 2) speed and elaboration, and 3) mental/physical interaction.

Consciousness. Graham Wallas (1926) characterized thinking as occuring in four stages: 1) preparation, 2) incubation, 3) illumination, and 4) verification. These four stages are useful for understanding the process phase of writing.

A writer prepares to write by gathering ideas and information, by developing a plan of attack, by setting limits for the writing project, and so on. These are both mental and physical processes, since an activity such as gathering information requires both thinking about ideas and the physical act of accumulating books, articles, and other data.

Following the preparation stage, the writer enters the incubation stage, during which the mental process is suspended at the conscious level but continues at a subconscious level. An example of how the incubation stage works is when we are faced with a tough decision and we are advised to "sleep on it" before making the decision. By following this advice, we allow our subconscious to take over the thought process so as to bring some kind of order to the preparatory data that has been consciously stored. Incubation serves as a catalyst

for thought, taking the raw elements of ideas and enabling us to understand them more clearly, to see patterns and relationships, and then to use them in cogent, systematic ways.

When we emerge from a stage of incubation, we sometimes say that we have "seen the light." Wallas called this stage, appropriately, illumination. The appearance of a "happy idea" or a sudden inspiration is illumination. Zen Buddhists call this sudden enlightenment *satori*. In writing, it is an idea on which to act.

By acting, the writer moves into the physical process phase of verification, or "trying out" the idea. Verification may be accomplished through rehearsal (for example, talking to someone about it, acting it out, walking through the idea) or through drafting in some mnemonic, notational, or textual form. If recorded in some fashion, the draft becomes a product that, unless it is judged to be in final form, serves to stimulate another cycle of the process phase. The product, in addition to its roles as verifier of the illumination of the prior cycle and as product/stimulus for the next cycle, also may serve as preparation for a subsequent incubation period. Teachers often advise students who have written a first draft of a paper to "let it rest awhile" before attempting a revision. This period of "rest" can become another incubation stage in which the initial stimulus-process-product cycle leads to further illumination.

Speed and elaboration. The rate at which writers pass through Wallas' four stages, the extent of elaboration within the stages, and the number of cycles necessary to move from initial stimulus to final product vary greatly among writers. William Zinsser (1983) comments on writers' individuality:

> Some people write by day, others by night. Some people need silence, others turn on the radio. Some write by hand, some by typewriter, some by talking into a tape recorder. Some people write their first draft in one long burst and then revise; others can't write the second paragraph until they have fiddled endlessly with the first.

Buckley (1986) recounts that Anthony Trollope imposed a personal goal of writing 250 words every 15 minutes in order to reach his daily quota of 3,500 words. Earle Stanley Gardner, author of the Perry

Mason mystery novels and countless other books under a variety of pseudonyms, dictated nonstop to a staff of secretaries. Statesman and orator John C. Calhoun, according to Buckley, composed his speeches while he was plowing his fields. When he had a speech completely "written" in his mind, he would return to his study and write it on paper. "His writing," comments Buckley, "was an act of transcription." All of these examples serve to make the point that writing is a highly individualistic act.

Mental/physical interaction. Interaction between the mental and physical dimensions of the process phase is a factor contributing to the individuality of writing. Benjamin Bloom (1986) talks about "automaticity" as the mastery of any skill to the extent that it can be performed "unconsciously with speed and accuracy while consciously carrying on other brain functions." Automaticity becomes a factor in the writing process in the physical dimension, for example, when a writer becomes an adept typist.

Automaticity is also a factor in the mental dimension of process when the selection and organization of ideas occur quickly, seemingly without much deliberation. It is this level of automaticity that allowed Trollope to write consistently publishable prose at the phenomenal rate of 3,500 words each day. Similarly, it is the automaticity of the interaction between mental and physical dimensions that allowed Calhoun to "transcribe" his speeches without the necessity of revision. A number of living writers illustrate the automaticity of interaction. Isaac Asimov, George Simenon, and Buckley himself all report that they revise their writing only slightly before considering it "final," and yet all have achieved a high level of literary accomplishment.

Just as mental process instructs physical process, so too does physical process modify mental process. There are subtle differences in the way writing is accomplished when drafting is done with pen in hand compared to sitting at the typewriter. Dictating to a person is different from dictating to a machine. A person can respond and the interaction can become part of the process; a machine is mute.

Many writers experience physical process changes when new technology emerges. For instance, Henry James found his mobility al-

tered by the advent of the typewriter. Instead of being able to write when and where inspiration or inclination struck, using nothing more than pen and paper, James found himself confined to his study in order to dictate to a typist whose work schedule did not necessarily coincide with when the muse was abroad. Similarly, Isaac Asimov recounted in a television interview his own struggles to make the transition from typewriter to computer word processor.

Many writers also find that the influence of physical process on mental process can be effectively manipulated. Ernest Hemingway reputedly preferred to write his style of terse dialogue standing at a typewriter set atop a bookcase. But he sat at his desk and wrote in longhand the descriptive passages of his novels.

The extent to which ideas are processed consciously or subconsciously, the speed at which the process phase is completed and the extent of its elaboration, and the deliberateness or automaticity of interaction between mental and physical processes are all factors that are highly individualistic in the act of writing. Therefore, it would be foolhardy to try to prescribe a single formula that, if used consistently, will make anyone a good writer or will make a good writer better. So, the question arises: How should this model for writing direct the way teachers instruct students in the art of writing?

Implications for Writing Instruction

Teachers are coming to realize that traditional writing instruction in many classrooms is not only ineffective but often inhibits the development of writing competence. But the idea that *process* is the heart of the writing curriculum has been slow in coming, because traditionally the curriculum has focused on the *product* of writing, which is akin to saying that the final exam in biology, rather than the learning units leading up to the exam, is the biology curriculum. In the model for writing proposed here, process *is* the curriculum; written products are only validators of process.

Using this model, a number of suggestions seem pertinent with regard to teaching students to write well, by which I mean encouraging students to write using their natural manner of processing.

First, it seems reasonable to suggest that teachers should not make assumptions about the process characteristics of their students. It is easy for teachers to assume that their students' mental processes parallel their own when, in fact, they may be quite different (Walling 1981). Teachers need to treat process development as uniquely individual. Although the eventual goal may be creating a competent written product, the achievement of that goal is not through regimented prescription of the path to that product.

Viewing writing as a step-by-step procedure may be useful in a descriptive sense, but the steps should not become prescriptive. In

fact, the steps can be very useful when they are taken out of seemingly logical order and viewed as the artistic jumble that is real writing. Yes, it is effective to do prewriting activities and then to begin drafting; but sometimes a writer needs to go back to some prewriting activity *during* the drafting stage. Editing, to be effective, often requires a return to drafting, maybe even to prewriting. And so on. In real life the process of writing is messy business. The steps simply cannot be neatly boxed and ordered into a product assembly line. And, of course, the process is and must be different from one type of writing assignment to the next and from one writer to the next.

Second, students need to understand their own, personal process characteristics. By understanding better how they work, students can develop strategies that complement their natural tendencies. Teachers can help students reach this kind of understanding by 1) exploring the process dimension with students so that they can recognize different ways of thinking about writing and different ways that mental and physical process characteristics interrelate, and 2) asking probing questions that push students to examine their own mental and physical activities as they work on different types of writing projects.

The emphasis on process in this writing model carries one caveat: process can be imperfect. This is an important distinction from the traditional, product-oriented writing curriculum. Imperfect products – book reports, term papers, etc. – have never been acceptable in the traditional curriculum. Students have been taught from the earliest grades that written work, to be acceptable, must be error-free. Can any teacher really wonder why many students dislike writing and write as little and as seldom as possible? Imagine how reluctant a boy might be to ride a bicycle if, while learning to ride, he was criticized or ridiculed whenever he fell off or had to put a foot down for balance. Yet, teachers traditionally have expected that written products should exhibit the perfection of a practiced writer, not the shaky imperfections of someone just learning a new skill. The result, as Graves and Stuart comment, is that "most of us have been taught that we are unworthy of putting words on paper" (1985).

The process approach, by contrast, says it is okay to make mistakes. Process implies trial and *error*. The act of writing itself is what

the teacher should be concerned with. That act, because of its highly individualistic nature, is subject to all the fumblings of a beginner at any highly complex task.

Third, teachers can suggest, demonstrate, and model process options for students. Without requiring or prescribing, teachers can provide students with ideas to try out for themselves. Teachers should be able to show students different ways of approaching writing tasks. For example, by periodically writing along with students, teachers can model their own processes in writing by "thinking aloud" as they themselves write. Students who have the opportunity to observe writers at work may begin by imitating the modeled methods; but later, as they write more on their own, they will discard, enhance, and adapt those early imitations to fit their own personal style of processing.

Another way that teachers can assist beginning writers is to pull together several models of good writing. (See "Suggested Resources" at the end of the fastback.) By using examples of good writing and helping students to examine them critically, teachers can stimulate thinking about writing. Using sample readings effectively, however, requires moving out of the product-examination mode and into the process-examination mode. Typically, in product examination students are asked to look at the author's organization, use of words, etc. In process examination the questions are more speculative: Why might the author have chosen this example to support a particular point? How do you think the writer came to choose this set of examples? And so on. Process examination seeks to get students to probe behind the words on a page in order to get at the author's manner of processing, and thereby they gain insights that may serve them as they develop their own ways of going about the act of writing.

Finally, teachers can expand opportunities for students to examine how others process by structuring collaborative writing and editing activities. Collaborative writing, described next, helps students examine both their own process characteristics and those of their co-writers and peers.

Collaborative Writing

Collaborative writing restructures the writing process, transforming it from an individual, often solitary, activity into a shared, cooperative experience. In collaborative writing students become co-authors, in pairs or trios, of a shared product. This product may be a report, a short story, a play, or simply a paragraph. The key element in collaborative writing is process, not product.

Collaborative writing need not be confined to the English or language arts classroom. In fact, it is an ideal strategy in science and social studies classes, where students often are asked to undertake fairly major research assignments. Tackling a complex scientific investigation using teams is a common practice both in the classroom and in "real world" laboratories. Collaborative writing can be used to support such an investigation by giving students the chance to work as teams through the experiments and then their write-ups, just as they might be called on to do in a professional laboratory setting.

With collaborative writing, students learn from each other in new and sometimes novel ways. The process encourages students to verbalize about writing itself as well as about the subject of the writing assignment. Students are able to share ideas and problems and work toward a mutually satisfying product. The process helps students to elaborate on initial ideas, to voice and support their opinions, and to evaluate new information and ideas – all skills with which beginning writers tend to have difficulties.

19

Getting students to work together effectively and efficiently is the first instructional challenge. The following guidelines may be useful:

1. *Establishing groups.* Collaborative writing is accomplished most effectively by a pair of students, and a writing group should include no more than three students. In larger groups the logistics of organizing the writing process tend to become unwieldy, especially with younger students. Some teachers find that they can allow students to choose their own partners; others prefer to pair students whose interests and personalities seem to be compatible.

2. *Ground rules.* The watchword in collaborative writing is cooperation, that is, working together. This means that students must learn to focus on the writing task, not the personalities of their partners. The contributions of each member are important; criticism must be directed at ideas, not people. Effective group work of any kind, of course, depends on the teacher communicating a spirit of cooperation, the feeling that "we are all in this together." Ground rules should be brief, clearly understood, and firmly enforced.

3. *Assignments.* Collaborative writing assignments should match the writing levels of the student group. It is tempting to reason that two (or three) heads are better than one and to assign more complex tasks for group work. This is a mistake (it could be disastrous) because the process of working as a pair or small group is itself a heady challenge. Initially, a group's assignment should be only as difficult as what a single student might be expected to undertake individually. Later, as students become comfortable in the group routine, more challenging assignments can be given.

4. *Time limits.* Collaborative projects tend to take more time than individual assignments. But some time will be needed for the grouping process itself, and additional time is required for more ideas to be discussed and evaluated than would be likely in an individual writing assignment. By having realistic time limits, groups are motivated to keep on target.

5. *Accountability.* Central to the cooperative spirit of collaborative writing is that the *group* is accountable. This is part of the "we are all in this together" philosophy. If grades are to be given for the collaborative product, then they must be group grades not individual

ones. No one is alone in a collaborative experience. A key idea embodied in collaboration is that group support will help prevent individual failure.

The collaborative process involves students in learning how to work with others. One of the group's first decisions will be to decide who does what. Some groups simply divide the tasks with each student being responsible for a portion. In other groups, students work on the whole project together with each individual participating as needed. The group may designate a recorder to do the actual writing or trade off the writing task among group members.

While some ways of working are more efficient than others, it is important that group members evaluate their own methods of operation and come to their own conclusions. Teachers can assist by suggesting ways of working but should refrain from rigid prescription. Eventually, pairs or trios that are allowed to work over time will develop unique working relationships that capitalize on the strengths of individual members.

In collaborative writing the best supervision often is done from a distance. Monitoring group activities, observing individuals, and general supervision can be done discreetly to allow the groups to exercise a responsible degree of freedom. Occasional prodding may be necessary to keep groups on task, but often it can be done through asking questions rather than issuing orders. Such questions as What are you working on now? How did you arrive at the decision? Have you considered other ways of accomplishing X? challenge students to think through their writing projects. Their answers, in many cases, will help the teacher keep track of the groups' progress. The teacher's role is not to direct group work but to ensure that the group is productive on its own.

21

Collaborative Editing

One way to ease into collaborative writing is to begin with collaborative editing. This form of peer editing uses small groups or pairs to edit and revise manuscripts that students have written on their own.

The guidelines for collaborative editing are similar to those for collaborative writing:

1. Groups are limited to two or three students.
2. Focus is on evaluating writing not writers.
3. Reasonable deadlines are established for completion of editing tasks.
4. The group as well as the individual is held accountable for the success of the process and the resulting products.

Too often editing is viewed as a mostly mechanical task, involving the correction of such errors as misplaced commas, improper capitalizations, misspellings, lack of subject-verb agreement, run-on sentences, and sentence fragments. Therefore, students get the impression that mechanical correctness is the most important aspect of competent writing. They will focus on the essentially decorative at the expense of real substance. Mechanical correctness is like painting a house; it is important as a final step in construction and omitting it would diminish the product, but the paint cannot shore up a badly built structure.

Students should begin the editing process by first examining the most important aspects of writing. Are the ideas clear? Is each point developed thoroughly? Are the paragraphs organized logically? When these important questions have been answered, then students can go on to deal with word choice, sentence construction, transitions, and, finally, to the details of mechanical correctness.

Several collaborative sessions are advisable, especially if the manuscript is lengthy. The first session might focus on one or two of the most essential aspects of the writing, say, basic organization and development. Subsequent sessions can be used to examine other aspects in descending order of importance, saving the "finishing touches" for last. In this way students will begin to see that writing is more than merely correct punctuation and spelling.

In collaborative editing, it is helpful to use checklists in the form of questions that direct students to look for certain qualities in their writing. Teachers can develop short checklists for each editing session. Each checklist should be specific enough to point students in the right direction yet flexible enough to allow them to think for themselves. At the final editing session, a comprehensive checklist can be used to complete the editing experience.

The sample checklist below has proven helpful for peer editing in several high school classes and can easily be adapted for younger or older students. Selected items can be used for shorter checklists for preliminary editing sessions.

Composition Checklist

1. Does the title catch the attention of the reader? Will the reader really know what the composition contains?
2. Does the composition read smoothly? Are the ideas presented logically so that the writer's thoughts are easy to follow?
3. Are there areas of the composition that need greater elaboration or explanation in order to promote better clarity?
4. Are the paragraphs complete units? Does each paragraph stick to its topic? Is there a topic sentence in each?

5. Does one paragraph lead to the next? Are transitional words and phrases used?
6. Does the composition have a clear beginning or introduction that lets the reader know what to expect?
7. Does the composition have a clear conclusion so that the reader is not left "hanging"? Are ideas summarized?
8. Does the writer have a specific audience in mind? Is the composition really directed toward those potential readers?
9. Does the writer maintain consistent voice and tone?
10. Are conventions of manuscript form, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization maintained? Have mechanical errors been noted for correction?

Collaborative editing is an effective strategy for making the transition from individual writing to collaborative writing. It is equally effective as a free-standing technique in classes that require students to submit individual final compositions. Another variation is to have students plan a written composition collaboratively, then do the actual drafting individually, and later regroup for collaborative editing.

In addition to language arts classes, collaborative writing and editing can be used to strengthen writing in the content areas. Indeed, in any subject that requires students to write, teachers can use collaborative writing and editing to build solid individual writing skills.

Selective Correction

The traditional practice of marking every error on a student's paper often does more harm than good. First, it is discouraging to the student; and second, it provides too much for the student to deal with at one time. A more effective practice is *selective correction.* To use selective correction, a teacher might follow these steps:

1. The teacher decides on one or two problem areas for concentration prior to correcting a particular writing assignment. For example, a teacher might devote one assignment to marking only capitalization and punctuation errors. On the next assignment only grammatical errors might be marked. And so on. In each case a target problem or limited set of errors would be designated for concentration.

2. The teacher then marks only the targeted errors. It is useful if the teacher puts the *target notation* (for example, capitalization, run-on sentence, usage, etc.) in the upper left-hand corner of the student's paper to let the student know what type of error has been marked. Later, students and the teacher can use this target notation as a sorting key when reviewing a portfolio of the student's writing.

3. When papers are returned to students, the teacher should discuss the targeted problems and reteach those items in which students are deficient. Teachers cannot assume that marking errors equals teaching. Students often need direct instruction in order to correct

their errors. This correction/instruction phase is also an opportunity for students to work cooperatively, as an extension of prior collaborative writing and editing.

Selective correction should not be limited to language mechanics. Student writing should be marked using marginal comments on more important considerations, such as clarity, organization, and development. And because a teacher's priorities tell students what is really important, those more important considerations should receive attention first and more frequently. Mechanical correctness should not be allowed to become the hobgoblin of students' writing endeavors.

As students write more, they should keep a portfolio of their assignments. Through periodic reviews of their work, students and the teacher can see that progress is being made. Because progress in a complex endeavor like writing comes slowly and in small steps, students sometimes feel they are not improving much. By looking back at some of their early assignments, students can see just exactly how far they have really come.

Parents sometimes question selective correction because it departs from the mark-every-error approach with which they are familiar. When teachers initially are introduced to this method of correcting student writing, they too raise questions. Won't marking just some errors mislead students? How will students improve if their mistakes are not pointed out to them? Here are some good reasons to keep in mind for using selective correction:

1. Marking every error discourages young writers. Students should be expected to make errors as they learn and practice. Errors in the mechanical aspects of composition should not diminish the value of the thought behind the writing.

2. Marking every error gives students too much to deal with at one time. Many students sincerely want to improve their writing; but if they make all sorts of mistakes, then marking every error is likely only to compound their problems. They may not be able to winnow serious errors from trivial ones or to focus on related types of errors in order to improve on their own.

3. Because selective correction focuses on target problems, teachers are able to concentrate instruction on specific problems. If teachers

use the target corrections as starting points for subsequent direct teaching, then students are more likely to develop the writing skills they need in order to avoid making the same mistakes in the future.

4. By choosing different targets for different assignments, teachers can ensure that all the skills that need to be taught are taught – but in bite-size pieces that are easier for students to understand and incorporate into their own writing practice.

5. The target notation written at the top of each paper tells students and parents which types of errors are being marked and serves notice that selective correction is being used. This makes it clear to students and their parents that the teacher has not merely missed other errors.

6. A distinction must be made between *marking errors* and *grading*. Marking errors in student writing is designed to help students recognize and correct writing problems. Assigning grades is for the purpose of evaluating the final product. This distinction must be made clear to students.

There are a couple of grading practices that are compatible with the process approach to writing instruction. The first is holistic grading in which an overall assessment score is given for a piece of writing but no individual errors are marked. The second is portfolio grading in which sets of student papers are graded at specific intervals over a period of time. Both practices tend to diminish the importance of grades per se so that more attention can be paid to selective correction as a facet of the writing process in which written products are primarily for practice.

Selective correction is an effective technique not only for students in all grades and in all disciplines but for busy teachers as well, because it involves more efficient use of their time. Obviously, it takes less time to mark only one or two types of mistakes in a paper than it does to mark all the mistakes. But the technique does more than that; selective correction targets needed follow-up teaching. And if selective correction shows that students have mastered a certain skill, then the teacher can focus on other skills where further instruction is needed. Teachers who use selective correction will find that they spend less time marking papers and thus can require more writing assignments from students. In this way students gain more practice at writing, and practice is necessary for learning to write well.

Spelling Improvement Through Writing

A few words about spelling are in order. Almost all children, when they are intent on writing, will make up their own spellings with varying degrees of phonetic legitimacy. As students mature as writers, they gradually replace individual spellings with standard spellings. Consequently, teachers should not be overly demanding in the early years with regard to proper spelling of all words in students' writing.

On the other hand, teachers should expect correct spelling of words with which students are familiar. Teachers can circle spelling errors of common sight words and recent word acquisitions in specific subjects, while correcting or ignoring misspellings of words with which students are not likely to be familiar. For example, if a young student writes, "Were did the boys go in Mischigun?" the teacher might circle the student's misspelling of *where* but ignore or correct the student's attempt at *Michigan*. This approach can be used at the elementary school level; but beginning in middle school, students usually can be held accountable for almost all spelling. By this time students should be proficient in the use of the dictionary so they no longer need to rely on guesswork or their own phonetics when spelling an unfamiliar word.

As with other elements of writing, the principle of selective correction should be applied to spelling. The student whose paper is "bleeding" with red marks for misspelled words is likely to get the

message that the process of writing is fundamentally one of avoiding misspellings. That is not, of course, what writing is all about. Teachers should avoid sending this message.

At all grade levels, student writing can feed spelling development. Misspelled words that persist through several cycles of selective correction can be used to generate individual spelling lists for students, and these individual lists sometimes can be pooled for group spelling practice. Also, students can anticipate their spelling needs in the prewriting stage by looking up ahead of time the words they plan to use in their writing. For example, when writing in the content areas, such as history, science, music, and the arts, students can compile in advance a list of the specialized terms they plan to use. This will expedite their writing during the drafting stage.

29

Some Final Thoughts

The key to using the model for writing instruction advocated here is understanding that product should *inform* not *direct* process. By examining students' written products, teachers have a rudimentary diagnostic tool for understanding the process of writing. Products can say something about process, not everything. To use a cliché, the product is merely the tip of the iceberg. Teachers who put too much faith in only what they can see are likely to suffer the fate of the *Titanic*.

Teachers who want to teach writing well need to write themselves. They need to wrestle with ideas and form them into sentences and paragraphs that communicate to real audiences. They will not necessarily find any magic formula for teaching when they write themselves; but in examining their own struggles, they will gain insights into the process of writing with which their students must grapple.

In the final analysis, it is doubtful that anyone can *teach* others how to write successfully. What teachers can do is help students to examine the ways others have found to write successfully, to examine the ways the students themselves think and work at writing, and to encourage them to develop their own unique paths to successful writing.

Suggested Resources

The following books are part of the growing body of literature focusing on the process dimensions of writing and writing instruction. Teachers at all grade levels will find topics of interest related to those discussed in this fastback.

Butler, A., and Turbill, J. *Towards a Reading-Writing Classroom.* Roseberry, Australia: Primary English Teaching Association, 1985.

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